

Thurston Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124802
Local Authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	340658
Inspection dates	10–11 February 2010
Reporting inspector	Ian Seath HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	14–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1412
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	353
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cler Hobbs
Principal	Miss Helen Wilson
Date of previous school inspection	7 November 2006
School address	Norton Road Thurston Bury St Edmunds
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by six additional inspectors and one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. Over half of inspection time was spent looking at learning, especially of boys. Inspectors visited 59 classes and teachers. They observed the school's work, and that of students, visited the sixth form centre, and met with many of the school staff including managers and the head teacher. In addition, inspectors met representatives of the governing body and local authority, representatives of different groups of students and staff. By the close of the inspection 280 completed questionnaires had been received from parents and carers.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the effectiveness of the self-evaluation process in driving improvement
- the current learning and progress of boys and the effectiveness of the school's measures to improve it

Information about the school

The school is larger than most secondary schools and has a very large sixth form. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is low, as is the proportion who are of minority ethnic heritage. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is much lower than found nationally.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

This is a school that has improved since the last inspection and is now outstanding. School improvement plans, and those self-assessments that have their origins at departmental level are strong, with an often clear view of strengths and weaknesses. The school's overall self-assessment is good, although insufficiently self critical of some aspects of attainment. Issues arising from the last inspection have been addressed well. Good arrangements are in place for teachers and senior staff to share good practice, which is leading to greater consistency in the quality of teaching. Management systems that underpin the college's operation are efficient and effective. The school has an accurate view of its own teaching, and is clear about where strengths and weaknesses lie. For these reasons, the school has demonstrated a good capacity for sustained improvement.

The school offers an exceptional curriculum. In addition, plans are in hand to broaden this further and offer more vocational elements. Exceptional care, guidance and support mean that many students attain standards that they would not otherwise be able to. In particular, the school is now placing an appropriate emphasis on raising the attainment of middle ability boys, which has declined in recent years. Early indications are that these strategies are now having a positive effect in class, so that these students' attainment and progress are improving in line with the rest of the school where attainment is above average and progress is good. In class, students willingly take responsibility for their own learning and are keen to participate. The school has recognised that in a few classes the most capable students are not always sufficiently challenged and has introduced promising strategies to address the issue, for example through the gifted and talented programme.

Students take a pride in their school. Staff morale is high. Parents and carers are overwhelmingly supportive of the school, and a very large majority are happy with their child's experiences. Students feel safe, and the school's safeguarding arrangements are excellent.

The principal, together with middle and senior leaders, has given the school an excellent direction for improvement. In this, she has been supported by very able governors. The very large majority of staff, students, parents and carers are supportive of the school and place it at the heart of their community. As one young student bravely said to the inspector in his class, with the approval of his peers, 'This school's the best ever'.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Within 6 months, devise and implement a strategy to ensure that the most able

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students are stimulated to achieve their best by:

- ensuring that the outstanding care given to students is matched by their level of challenge
- building the above into the academic tutoring process
- devising and implementing a system to monitor the effectiveness of care and challenge provided and to ensure that it is consistently applied in all subject and years.
- Within 18 months, ensure that levels of attainment are well above national averages in all subjects at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form by:
 - using the lesson observation system to accurately monitor and challenge attainment in class
 - ensuring that methods of assessment are used accurately and rigorously in all subjects to monitor students' progress
 - increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons so that teaching becomes outstanding overall

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

When students enter the school in year 9 their attainment is generally above national averages, though in some recent years it has been well below this level. As a consequence, standards of attainment have declined but have generally remained above average. The proportion of students gaining 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, was above average in 2009. The school's own monitoring data indicate encouraging and significant improvements in attainment for 2010. However, there are significant variations in the success of individual subjects at both GCSE and in the sixth form.

Large differences in attainment on entry have affected students' progress. This is because, with entry in year 9, the school has only one year to address any underachievement before they start GCSE studies. This has led to variations in students' progress, particularly for middle ability boys whose progress was below that expected in 2008 and 2009. This had a negative impact on the school's overall progress. Inspectors paid close attention to this minority of boys in class. This revealed a picture of progress that was at least satisfactory for them and in the majority of cases was in line with the good progress seen more generally. Coupled with improved attendance and outstanding support, this is beginning to result in standards that are at least average and in many cases above for this group of boys. Many have a renewed enthusiasm for their studies and for school.

The quality of pupils' learning, including that of those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, is good. Students engage enthusiastically with learning and many are confident and committed to their work. Students enjoy discussion and analysis in lessons. They are capable learners who, for the most part, develop skills of mature independence quickly. Inspectors observed that most pupils make good progress in

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lessons, and understand what they need to do to meet target grades. Because of these strengths, coupled with ordered and calm movement around school and the rarity of incidents of poor behaviour in class, behaviour is outstanding. Students are a credit to the school. Attendance is around average, and levels of persistent absence have fallen. Students feel very safe at the college, and this was confirmed by very positive responses in questionnaires from parents and carers. Students say there is always someone they can go to if they have any concerns or problems. An intolerance of bullying is evident, and students say any incidents are acted upon swiftly and effectively. They show a secure understanding of the importance of internet safety and the dangers and effects of cyber bullying.

Students understand the need for a healthy lifestyle. A large number of them take part in the rich range of sporting activities and opportunities the college provides,

Students are rightly very proud of their college. They are enthusiastic participants in house activities and keen to represent the college in interschool sports. In a recent Year 9 survey, students said that they can achieve a great deal at Thurston. Sixth form students are proactive in their local and rural communities, developing their citizenship skills. Sports leaders and subject support students make a valuable contribution to learning within the college and the local group of feeder schools. Students were involved in awarding the college's catering contract and are happy to take responsibility in organising events such as the 'Beat it' performance and the Year 11 prom. Community forum involvement provides very positive feedback about college students.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2 2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

The quality of teaching is good. Teachers' planning and the pace of lessons support learning well. Questioning is used effectively to stimulate discussion and to check learning. The school intranet has learning materials that are used well, but its use in some subject areas is under-developed. Teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects contributes to a positive classroom ethos. Excellent support for pupils with identified needs contributes significantly to their learning. Teaching assistants work effectively, and students value their help. The use of assessment to support learning is good. Pupils are aware of their target grades and current level of performance and are given clear guidance on how to improve. In many lessons, pupils' achievement is closely tracked and monitored and specific areas of underachievement identified. The school recognises that this practice is uneven across the school and between subjects, and is working hard to address the issue. Homework is generally well marked with helpful comments.

The outstanding curriculum is very well tailored to meet students' needs and provides them with the best opportunities to achieve their potential. At Key Stage 4, students can choose not only from a very large number of GCSE courses, but also from vocational courses provided by a nearby further education college. These include Young Apprenticeships and engineering. The school maintains strong links with local employers by providing all Year 10 students with two weeks of work experience. The innovative Year 9 curriculum includes Learning to Learn lessons and an activities week which are very well received by students. Booster evenings for English and mathematics are improving standards of literacy and numeracy. High quality computer use is evident in students' work. A very broad range of enrichment activities, very well supported by students, enhances their enjoyment of college life.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Despite the large size of the school, staff make every effort to know their students as individuals. An excellent pastoral system supports intervention for those students who need it. Very effective transition arrangements are in place when students join the school at Year 9, ensuring they settle quickly and comfortably. Priority is given to ensuring that the needs of the more vulnerable students are met and that any barriers to learning are removed quickly. Students have access to a wide range of services and expertise, both inside and outside the school. Support for students who have diverse or challenging needs is excellent, and is carefully matched to their needs in specialist room areas within the school. These rooms have a welcoming atmosphere of purposeful and constructive activity and are very well regarded by the considerable number of students who use them. These activities are very well managed. As a result of the well-targeted advice and guidance

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they receive, students are well informed about future opportunities in further and higher education, training or employment, and know what they need to do to achieve them.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The principal successfully sets the tone for school improvement and is supported exceptionally well by senior and middle managers. She has skilfully devolved responsibility amongst a group of talented and highly motivated individuals. There is a concerted commitment to maintain the pace of improvement which is clearly shown in the school's improvement plan. This plan is firmly founded on critical self- evaluation, with the outcomes focused clearly on improving attainment and progress, set against challenging but realistic targets. The school is now well-focused on the elimination of low attainment in middle ability boys, with encouraging and consistent indications of success.

The quality of teaching and learning are evaluated accurately and the response to any relative weaknesses is prompt and effective. The lesson observation system is a good tool for improvement, although opportunities to accurately evaluate attainment in class are sometimes missed by the process. The quality of teaching is invariably good with elements that, in the best classes, are outstanding. There are indications of improvements since the last inspection. Senior managers and middle managers are all involved in assessing the quality of teaching. Everyone subscribes to the willingness to improve the quality of the teaching. This results in an enthusiasm across the school for all to be involved in enhancing the quality of their work and to do their best on behalf of all the students.

The school knows its students well and is fully aware of their backgrounds and the challenges they face in their lives. This includes recognising and responding to the needs of students who might otherwise be potentially at risk. The academic performance of individuals and groups is analysed in depth and the response to any shortfall addressed rapidly. The support for those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is outstanding and they thrive. The principles of equality are very well embedded in the curriculum, and well reinforced in all that the school does. There is no evidence of discrimination of any form and students are consistently caring and supportive towards each other. For these reasons the school's performance in providing equality of opportunity is outstanding.

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Governors play a very active and extensive role in school life and are strongly committed to the success of the school. They bring a broad range of skills and experience to their role and support the school very effectively, regularly visiting and providing constructive criticism and encouragement to staff. They challenge poor performance well, and have been instrumental in taking difficult decisions in the interests of students and the school's success. Financial management is strong. Governors have ensured that the school meets all of its statutory requirements, including those for racial equality. Safeguarding arrangements and the promotion of community cohesion are outstanding. However the extent to which the effectiveness of some policies are monitored could usefully be developed further.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

The school has a successful and large sixth form that provides for the needs of its students well. It is housed in exceptionally good accommodation that provides a pleasant and very practical and well-equipped centre of learning. Progress made by students has been variable in recent years, and in 2009 was around that expected given their prior attainment. Retention in the sixth form is high. Students on many courses perform well and attain high grades. They receive a rich experience during their time in the sixth form and quickly mature into capable, responsible, and confident young people. They make a strong contribution to the school and wider community and demonstrate a good awareness of how to achieve economic wellbeing. A high percentage of students making successful applications to universities.

Good teaching and assessment practice promote good learning. Teaching is often

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challenging and stimulating, resulting in a mature and thoughtful level of response from students. Students engage in discussion and debate with confidence and make perceptive observations. Provision includes a wide range of AS, A2 and enrichment courses. Students benefit from an effective academic tutorial system that includes advice on progression opportunities.

Leaders and managers in the sixth form have ambitious plans for improvement with a strong emphasis on self-evaluation. Effective action has been taken to tackle underperformance in a very small minority of subjects, with early indications that this is improving standards. Provision runs smoothly and excellent resources are effectively managed to the benefit of all students.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

Inspectors broadly agreed with the majority views of parents and carers, a very large majority of whom were supportive of the school and positive. A few raised concerns about how the school deals with unacceptable behaviour, but inspectors found no evidence for this around the school. A very small minority of parents and carers had concerns around the extent to which the school helped their child to have a healthy lifestyle, or takes account of their views. A very large majority of parents and carers are happy with their child's experiences at school, and agree that the school is effectively managed.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Thurston Community College to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 280 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1412 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	103	37	162	58	9	3	2	1
The school keeps my child safe	99	35	174	62	2	1	1	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	101	36	149	53	19	7	5	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	89	32	158	56	20	7	6	2
The teaching is good at this school	68	24	184	66	18	6	4	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	69	25	166	59	27	10	5	2
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	54	19	177	63	34	12	3	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	88	31	152	54	18	6	8	3
The school meets my child's particular needs	76	27	167	60	21	8	6	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	76	27	144	51	31	11	7	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	56	20	149	53	33	12	7	3
The school is led and managed effectively	101	36	150	54	13	5	4	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	114	41	145	52	11	4	6	2

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



12 February 2010

Dear Students,

Inspection of Thurston Community College, Bury St Edmunds, IP31 3PB

As you will know, I visited your school recently with several other inspectors. We came into many of your classes, looked at your work, and met many of you and your teachers. Throughout this you were courteous, helpful and polite, and I would like to thank you for that. Your school has many strengths and one of them is you.

Since the last inspection, your school has improved and it is now outstanding. The principal and her team, together with your teachers, have made many improvements. But it's not all down to them. You have also played your part by working hard, improving your attendance and learning well in class - well done.

You told us many things about your school. For example, that you felt safe and well cared for - and we agree with you and your parents and carers about that. We think that the care and support you receive are excellent, and so is the choice of subjects and activities. We also judged that your sixth form provides good opportunities for your further education.

We have asked the school to do two things, both of which they will need your help with. First, we have asked them to make sure that you are all challenged to learn at your very best. This means that if you are finding that the work you are doing is too easy then you should say so. It also means doing extra reading and work at home - remember that it is your education and it is in your interests to make the very best of the opportunities you have.

The second thing we have asked the school to do is to monitor and improve further the quality of teaching and assessment so that you learn better. Again, you can help with this by asking if you are unsure, and by making sure you are very clear about what you need to do to reach your targets.

Finally, we were pleased to hear from you that the amount of bullying is very low. You can help to keep it this way by talking to a teacher or tutor if you are affected.

Again, well done and thank you

Yours sincerely

Ian Seath

Her Majesty's Inspector

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